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When performance studies meet discourse theory

The political performance analysis protocol as an interdisciplinary methodological tool

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Despite its versatility as a methodological tool, discourse analysis suffers from a logocentric bias, a tendency to primarily focus on text while ignoring the non-textual components of discourse. Although poststructural approaches to discourse analysis like Discourse Theory (DT) have developed an understanding of discourse going beyond language, there are few practical methodological tools for scholars from these traditions to engage with these non-textual elements. This article fills that gap by providing an original qualitative methodological tool, the Political Performance Analysis Protocol (PPAP) which adapts one of the signature methods of Performance Studies to political performances. It does so by describing the four constitutive elements of political performances – background symbols and foreground scripts, actor, audience and *mise-en-scène* – and empirically illustrating them through the case of Greta Thunberg’s “How dare you?” performance at a United Nations to show the PPAP’s relevance as a tool complementing other forms of discourse analysis.

Keywords: performance analysis, political performances, discourse theory, performance studies, methodology, greta thunberg

1. Introduction

The study of discourse is a rewarding yet challenging endeavour. For scholars across social sciences and humanities, discourse has become one of the most prominent concepts as well as a fundamental component of their analysis. This is not surprising as discourse provides a lens to access meaning-making across an infinite number of situations, from the intricacies of the micro-level of linguistic

constructions to the macro-level of the hegemonic structures of meaning shaping our vision of reality.

However, the flexibility of discourse also comes with limitations, particularly when it comes to empirical analysis. If discourse is everywhere, how are we supposed to concretely engage with it? Although adopting a more restrictive understanding of discourse is the way scholars in disciplines like linguistics address this problem, the question remains unresolved for approaches like Discourse Theory (DT) where the social itself is understood as discourse.

Indeed, in their agenda-setting article, De Cleen et al. (2021,28) acknowledged that “methodology remains an area where DT could be strengthened” and encouraged the production of methodological innovations to address this. While much work has already been done in that purpose, particularly in recent years (Brown 2024; Küppers 2024; see also De Cleen et al. this SI), there remains a need to more specifically focus on the non-textual and performative dimension of discourse. This article contributes to that endeavour by providing an original qualitative methodological tool, the Political Performance Analysis Protocol (PPAP). By examining performance as a specific embodied form of discourse, this article adapts one of the signature methods of the discipline of performance studies to bypass the logocentric bias of most forms of discourse analysis, including DT but also Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and multimodal analysis, in which various initiatives to overcome that limitation have already been developed (Norris 2011; Van Leeuwen 2015; Machin & Mayr 2023).

With the PPAP, this article provides an inductive method able to be used across a range of political phenomena. This tool is a synthesis of three elements: (1) Patrice Pavis’s (2005) influential questionnaire for performance analysis designed, (2) Jeffrey Alexander’s (2006) typology of constitutive elements of social performances developed and (3) Shirin Rai’s (2014) Political Performance Framework (PPF). By adapting performance analysis through the lens of DT, this article makes the case for the need to account for the embodied, theatrical and ephemeral dimensions of discourse. After a discussion of four constitutive elements of political performances – background symbols and foreground scripts, actor(s), audience and *mise-en-scène* – and an empirical illustration through the case of Greta Thunberg’s “*How dare you?*” performance at a United Nations Climate Summit (Thunberg 2019), this article will discuss the relevance of the PPAP as a method to complement other forms of discourse analysis.

2. Discourse Theory and empirical analysis

Discourse is a complex concept which means different things in each discipline, and there have been nearly as many definitions as there have been scholars using

it. To clarify this situation, Schiffrin et al. (2015,1) argued that all definitions of discourse fall into one of three broad categories: “(1) anything beyond the sentence, (2) language use, and (3) a broader range of social practice that includes non-linguistic and non-specific instances of language”. The first definition is primarily used in linguistics, to contrast discourse with other units of language like words or morphemes. The second definition corresponds to a wider understanding in social sciences of discourse as synonymous to any use of language more generally. Despite the usefulness of these two ways of defining discourse, their narrowness excludes anything related to performance from their scope.

In contrast, the third type of definition of discourse extends its meaning beyond language, following the poststructural theories of authors like Foucault (1972) or Laclau & Mouffe (1985). This article will primarily engage with the latter, and more widely with the ‘Essex school’ of discourse, also known as ‘Discourse Theory’ (DT), but its argument more generally applies to other critical understandings of discourse. This notably includes Fairclough (1995,131) who talked about discourse as a “practice” which goes beyond text by including “semiotic practice in other semiotic modalities such as photography and non-verbal (e.g. gestural) communication.

Given the breadth of the research conducted within the approach, there is not a single unified way DT mobilises the notion of discourse. De Cleen et al. (2021,24) highlighted three meanings of discourse within DT in decreasing order of abstraction. In the first one, discourse constitutes the ontological underpinnings of the theory, the very foundations of the approach which sees “the social itself *as* a discourse” (*ibid.*). At this ontological level, discourse is “a horizon of meaningful practices and significant differences” (Howarth 2000,9) through which every aspect of social life acquires meaning and identity. Understood in this macro-discursive way, every kind of meaning-making, whether it is structured through language or not, is necessarily part of discourse, but this conception provides an overarching framework rather than methodological clues to practically approach discourse.

The second meaning of discourse for DT shifts from an all-encompassing notion to a category within which one can analytically separate various structures of meaning. Framed this way, one can talk about discourses in the plural form which refer to “structured totalities articulating both linguistic and non-linguistic elements” (Laclau 2005,13). Faithful to the centrality of the Gramscian concept of hegemony for DT (Laclau & Mouffe 1985), these discourses do not merely co-exist in the public space, they are competing, engaging in a hegemonic struggle for salience while their meaning remains ever contingent and in flux. On this second meso-discursive level as well, discourses go beyond language to incorporate all

kinds of social practices that contribute to the articulation and fixation of meaning. However, regardless of the theoretical inclusivity of these first two levels, their abstract formulations do not provide sufficient means to practically engage with discourse.

This is precisely where the third and final meaning of discourse within the Essex school comes into play. In this more empirically minded understanding, discourse also refers to the specific ‘texts’ through which the structures of meanings described above become embodied. This micro-discursive level enables scholars from DT to access discourse, analysing the contingent ways discourse takes shape. However, De Cleen et al. (2021, 27–28) acknowledged that the “macro-analytical focus on *structures*” of DT “also tends to make it appear less detailed and systematic in its empirical analyses than the types of discourse analysis that are more linguistic-centred”, a point further accentuated by DT’s relative weakness in terms of methodology (even though works like that of Nikisianis et al. (2019) prove that it is not always the case). Moreover, although these ‘texts’ are understood very broadly beyond the strict linguistic focus of mainstream approaches to discourse to include a “range of texts, speeches, and signifying sequences of all sorts” (Howarth 2005, 336), the very choice of calling them ‘text’ leads to logocentrism, an excessive focus on textuality.

3. Performance and discourse

Given the fundamental importance of linguistics in the emergence of the very concept of discourse, it is not surprising that language plays a dominant role in the way scholars engage with discourse. And in many ways, text remains the dominant medium for meaning-making as well as the primary point of entry into discourse for analysts. Various scholars in discourse analyses already sought to address this limitation, as can be seen in Fairclough’s (1995, 131) extension of discourse to non-verbal communication or in Blommaert’s (2004, 123) call to develop a “more ‘open’ notion of text [...] which would allow for linguistic as well as non-linguistic analyses”. In DT, the explicit mentions that Laclau made about the extralinguistic or “non-linguistic elements” (Laclau 2005, 13), as well as the open formulations which Howarth chose like “meaningful practices” (Howarth 2000, 9) and “signifying sequences of all sorts” (Howarth 2005, 336) show that theorists from the Essex school also acknowledge that meaning-making goes beyond language, and thus beyond ‘text’ in a restricted sense. There is however no exhaustive list for the forms that these extralinguistic ways of meaning-making can take, and this openness in formulation has the potential to foster many innovative conceptualisations.

In this article, I focus on another form of ‘meaningful practice’ showcasing the performative dimensions of discourse: performance. Although many scholars from DT are intuitively familiar with the concept of performance, few of them have explicitly defined it or articulated its relationship with the wider notion of discourse. A notable exception to this can be found in the work of Carpentier (2017: 47–51) who engaged with philosophy and sociology to highlight the role of social interaction and “embodied practices” in the articulation of the “discursive-material knot”. Going further in an interdisciplinary discussion of the links between discourse theory and artistic performances, Petrovic Lotina (2021: 69) framed performance as a “practice of articulation” where discourse is “materialised through the process of symbolisation and corporeally constituted, valued, viewed, and exchanged”. This article extends their endeavour by further engaging with the scholarship in performance studies, arguing that performance fits with the ontological premises of DT.

Going back to the very root of the concept, a “performance implies any action that is conducted with the intention of being to some degree witnessed by another” (Rowe 2013, 8), what Schechner (2013, 28) succinctly called “showing doing”. In other words, a performance is an action characterised by two necessary conditions: relationality, the presence of two people engaging in a social interaction, and reflexivity, the awareness that an interaction takes place and has meaning. Although the concept has historically been associated with the context of theatre, such a broad definition encompasses a much larger set of phenomena. Because performance is both an intuitive and flexible concept, its applications are potentially endless which explains why, more than the core concept of performance studies, “performance also constitutes the methodological lens that enables scholars to analyse events *as* performance” (Taylor 2003, 3).

Although De Cleen et al. (2021, 27) framed texts as the “embodiment of discourses”, performance constitutes a much more inclusive and holistic concept to engage with the concrete and embodied shape that discourses take, encompassing text and language but going beyond it. Furthermore, it is important to acknowledge the convergence in the epistemological foundations of performance studies which shares much of the poststructural premises of DT:¹ performance highlights the dynamic and contingent nature of meaning-making, the instability and

1. Beyond epistemology, the points of convergences between DT and performance studies would warrant a much longer discussion outside of the scope of this article, that would cover other elements like shared influences (from phenomenology and structural linguistics to Lacanian’s psychoanalysis), the central role of inter/transdisciplinarity and their empirical affinity with counter-hegemonic and marginalised discourses.

ever-changing fluidity of human interactions. Approaching the world “as performance” comes with the acknowledgement that meaning is always in flux, embodied, repeated, (mis)interpreted, challenged and ultimately ephemeral. Because of its focus on embodiment, on flesh and blood individuals, performance provides a particularly fitting point of entry to examine the interplay between materiality and discourse. As a result of this complementarity, the concept of performance is in a unique position to contribute to DT by providing a new way to engage with the third level of discourse, its material embodiment, while also offering a rich set of methodological tools which were developed by scholars in performance studies.

4. Performance analysis

Outside of DT, many critical approaches to discourse have recognised the importance to go beyond text and even developed tools to tackle extralinguistic elements, which Roch (2019, 15) described as the “fuzzy boundaries of discourse studies”. For instance, scholars from Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) have suggested to consider language, image, performance and so on, as “semiotic modes” whose combination constitutes discourse (Kress & Van Leeuwen 2001; Van Leeuwen 2015). In this perspective, discourse is characterised by its “multimodality” and discourse analysts are encouraged to engage with all these dimensions semiotically. Other discourse analysts, like Luff & Heath (2015), have suggested that the solution to this issue lies in “transcribing embodied action”. Inspired by ethnomethodology, this type of method thus offers sophisticated systems to turn extra-linguistic elements back into words, where they can be analysed. In many ways, multimodal approaches to discourse have been pioneers in expanding the analysis of discourse beyond text, revitalising interest in semiotics while updating its tools beyond linguistics, encouraging innovative methodologies and challenging conventional forms of discourse analysis. They paved the way for the method advocated in this article as the PPAP’s intervention is in the continuation of their efforts.

However, whether it is turning the non-verbal elements of discourse into semiotic modes or transcribing them, these approaches have limitations that prevent them from fully capturing the performative dimension of discourse. Even though Kress & Van Leeuwen (2001) do include a range of non-textual modes of discourse, including image, music, sound, gesture or colour, all these modes are not covered in the same depth within the literature, with visuals being particularly favoured at the expense of others, like gesture, posture or movement. The PPAP places itself in the lineage of the work of Norris (2004, 2011) who emphasised the embodied and interactional nature of discourse, and other scholars who adopted

social semiotics and her framework of multimodal (inter)action analysis (MIA). It however departs from multimodal analysis as it seeks to move away from their focus on non-textual *signifiers* which translates into a reliance on semiotics as well as a limited account of the wider context of a social interaction. For instance, even multimodal interactional analysis does not fully capture the dynamic relationship between performer and audience, the strategic agency of the actor, the ritualistic function of these performative practices, or more generally their theatricality.

To overcome this methodological hurdle, I have thus chosen to turn to performance studies. There is an extraordinary diversity of methods used by scholars in performance studies, from archival work to practice as research and ethnography (Kershaw & Nicholson 2011). However, this article particularly adapts *performance analysis*, one of the signature methods of performance studies. Just like discourse analysis in social sciences, there is hardly a unified and exhaustive definition of performance analysis. Stemming from the long tradition of literary and theatre criticism, the first academic attempts at developing a systematic account of performance analysis “flirted with the technical vocabulary of semiotics” (Auslander 2004, 4) to bring a form of scientific rigour to the exercise, which came under heavy criticism (Pavis 2003, 13). Since then, although semiotics remains an important part of performance analysis, the method has moved away from ‘scientific’ analysis towards a form of eclecticism.

Among the various works on the topic, I chose to follow the footsteps of Pavis (2003), who produced one of the most popular accounts of performance analysis. He most notably developed a questionnaire (Pavis 1985, 208–212), which he updated several times until its latest iteration (Pavis 2003, 37–40), providing a set of questions to help the analyst engage with any specific performance. Even if Pavis’s questionnaire is biased towards theatrical performances, its flexibility allows it to address many other types of artistic performances, as proven for instance by Auslander (2004) who adapted it to the analysis of music. However, although it applies well to artistic performances, Pavis’s questionnaire cannot be directly used for social performances as some of its questions and categories do not apply. For instance, Pavis emphasised the intentionality of dramaturgical choices, which are not as tightly controlled since there are no directors in social interactions. Likewise, although storytelling does play a role in politics for instance, social performances are not necessarily organised around a narrative structure.

5. From artistic to social performances

More importantly, there are deeper differences between artistic performances and social ones, lying in their relationship with authenticity and artificiality. Except for performance art which blurs these metatheatrical lines, artistic performances are grounded on a distinction between the artificial fiction and an authentic reality (Fischer-Lichter 2008), taking place in what Bakhtin (1981: 84) called a chronotope, “the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in Literature”. As a result, spectators of an artistic performance are presumed to be aware of the artificiality of the performance: they implicitly recognise that the actors are playing a role, they engage in the experience knowing it will have a beginning and an end, they are aware that the performance witness is mediated by a specific *mise-en-scène*, they know that events taking place during the performance are scripted.

On the other hand, social performances follow different rules. Because this distinction between reality and fiction is not present during social performances, authenticity takes a different meaning. The unescapable need for impression management during social interactions means that human beings as social animals are in constant performance of self (Goffman 1959). But because of the “antitheatrical prejudice” (Grobe 2020,793–795) characterising our contemporary societies, acting is associated with deceit and falsehood. This means social performers uphold a form of naturalism through the delicate task of maintaining the illusion that there is no distinction between their social role and a hypothetical ‘true self’. As a result of this naturalistic imperative, “a defining feature of a good performance may be that it does not look like a performance at all” (Saward 2010,69). Beyond micro-social performances, this argument can be extended to structural social performative constructs like gender which Butler (1990,179) described as “a construction that regularly conceals its genesis”. She added that “the tacit collective agreement to perform, produce, and sustain discrete and polar genders as cultural fictions is obscured by the credibility of those productions”. While that contingent desire for naturalism is not absolute – as audiences over the world are becoming increasingly media-savvy and reflexive about social performances, particularly on social media (Hogan 2010) – this difference between the acknowledged artificiality of artistic performances to the performed authenticity of social performances implies the need for specifically tailored tools that can unravel the very mechanisms that political performances aim to conceal.

For the protocol I designed, I used a typology developed by Alexander (2006) in the context of his approach to “cultural pragmatics”. In this work, he isolated

the constitutive elements to every social performance and discussed their interconnections.² The tool I develop focuses on four fundamental elements: (1) background elements and foreground scripts; (2) actor(s); (3) audience(s) and (4) *mise-en-scène*. The remainder of this article will detail the meaning of each of these constitutive elements and apply them to the context of *political* performances.

Indeed, while Alexander's framework provides the foundation for the PPAP, his work had a more general purpose while this protocol contributes to the analysis of political performances as a specific "brand of 'showing doing' with some degree of political intent behind both the act and (potentially) the witnessing" (Rowe 2013, 11). It is important to acknowledge that Alexander's cultural pragmatics do consider the role of power in social performance by including two additional elements into his model: the "means of symbolic production" and "social powers" (Alexander 2006, 65–69), adding a layer of systemic factors to his model. While his effort to incorporate wider power structures is to be commended, these have been left out of the PPAP because they treat power as a separate category that operates in an external way to the other elements of social performances. However, in alignment with the tenets of DT and other forms of critical discourse analysis, the PPAP acknowledges that power operates at every level of discourse, from the background symbols to the staging of the performance. As such, instead of isolating from the rest, it embeds it within its analysis of the other components. As will be demonstrated in the case study below, engaging with the interactional and performative layers of discourse always informs us about every other aspect of discourse.

Furthermore, while Alexander's framework does account for power, it has clear limits on this aspect. First and foremost, it is grounded on an oversimplifying division between "early" and "complex" societies, which it inherited from its influences by earlier forms of anthropology. In addition to the postcolonial critique of othering and essentialising of 'early' societies, this leads him to romanticise performances in these societies and underestimate the constitutive role of ideology and power within performance. Finally, although Alexander shows how performance reinforces dominant forms of politics, his model does not explic-

2. Alexander's model is premised on the notion of "fusion", meaning that a successful performance will 'fuse' together each of these elements to produce the illusion of authenticity, with fusion being for him easier to achieve in 'simpler' societies than in more 'complex' ones. Going beyond this methodological intervention, I agree with Grobe (2020, 795) that one should be wary of the "repressed theatricality of fusion", as Alexander frames the desire for 'realistic' performances of the audience as universal and not contingent. Naturalism may not always be the name of the game for social performances. While acknowledging these limitations, Alexander's model remains the most sophisticated attempt at a typology of social performances.

itly address the role of counter-hegemonic performances in challenging power, particularly underestimating the agency of marginalised groups. To address these limitations, I have thus chosen to adapt Alexander's insights on social performances through the lens of the "Political Performance Framework" (PPF) designed by Rai (2014, 3) which updates his model and tackles these issues in a concise yet powerful way. The PPF addresses the way "political actors – individual and institutional – harness material bodies, rituals and ceremonies [...] to generate a political syntax that is both accepted and challenged by different audiences; and how the interactions between performance and its reception generate politics" (Rai 2014, 3). Because Rai's model accounts for power within performance, the potential for contestation and resistance as well as privilege in performance through the concept of performative labour, this makes the PPF aligned with the premises of the PPAP as well as an ideal complement to Alexander's model.

6. The Political Performance Analysis Protocol

Whether it is an artistic or a social one, approaching a performance holistically can easily become overwhelming for even the most prepared analyst. Beyond the textual dimension of the performance, whose own analysis is already a complex task, addressing theatricality adds a set of elements that are so interwoven within the performance that assessing their importance is challenging. Because performance analysis engages with the aesthetic dimension of political performances, this involves a wide range of elements. In order not to get lost within an intricate web of irrelevant details, the strategy adopted here breaks down the various elements of a political performances into interconnected categories.

It is important to be mindful of the pitfall of analysing these elements as semiotically disconnected signifiers, which leads to what Pavis (2003, 8) called a "butchered" effect – a *mise-en-pièces*. Such "atomisation" (*ibid.*, 21) runs the risk of dismantling the dynamic of the performance, downplaying the interactions between these constitutive elements and losing sight of the 'bigger picture', which was the main criticism I levelled against other methods of non-verbal analysis like multimodality or transcription. In terms of methods, this pragmatically means being mindful of not analysing any element individually but instead constantly highlighting their interconnection, while also analysing the performance as a *gestalt*, a whole that is more than just the superposition of its parts. In this regard, the protocol developed in this article follows the principle that Pavis (2003, 17) called "vectorization", "associating and connecting signs that form parts of networks, within which each sign only has meaning through the dynamic that it

relates to other signs”. This means the questions discussed below are designed in a way that turns political performances into dynamic networks of “weblike threads” (*ibid.*) resonating with one-another, including some redundancy and call-backs to the other components.

I will now develop the main dimensions of each of component, and then emulate Pavis by providing a set of questions to guide the analysis. When compiled together, these four sets of questions constitute my original tool for performance analysis, the Political Performance Analysis Protocol (PPAP). To empirically illustrate the way the PPAP works in practice, each set will be followed by a brief paragraph analysing the political performance of Swedish environmental activist Greta Thunberg during the United Nations (UN) Climate Summit in New York on the 23rd of September 2019. Colloquially known for her repetition of the sentence “*How dare you?*”, this speech is entitled “The World is Waking Up” (Thunberg 2019) and became iconic as Thunberg’s breakthrough performance as a globally recognised activist. In addition to its viral quality, this political performance was chosen on purpose because it is short and theatrically minimalist. The PPAP works particularly well on highly theatrical performances, with various actors performing in an extravagant manner, using sophisticated staging and props. However, this example showcases how even a brief performance with apparently little theatricality has layers that would be missed by only considering its textual components. These paragraphs of empirical illustration do not aim to be exhaustive but rather to showcase the potential of the PPAP as a tool while also connecting the micro-level of political performances to the macro-level of structures of power and identity formation.

6.1 Background symbols & foreground scripts

While Alexander conceptually distinguished symbols and scripts as two different elements of social performances, he often combined them within a broader category due to their symbiotic and thus deeply interdependent relationship (Alexander 2006, 33) and the PPAP follows his lead by considering both elements as two subparts of a larger whole.

Performances do not take place in a vacuum: they are located within a specific space and time, their textual component is shaped by the requirements of language, and they tap into a specific set of social and cultural resources to transmit meaning. In other words, political performances are contingent and grounded in a wider culture that simultaneously shapes and limits the potential forms of performance. This is precisely what is understood by *collective background symbols*: the deep systemic socio-cultural resources shared within a community or,

in Alexander's (2006, 58) words, "the already established skein of collective representations that compose culture – the universe of basic narratives and codes and the cookbook of rhetorical configurations from which every performance draws". Such a concept has found multiple echoes in the scholarship in discourse analysis, most notably Fairclough's (1995, 133) concept of "social practice", understood as the broadest level of discourse which provides its context, including social structures, dominant ideologies and cultural background.

These background symbols can be drawn from a myriad of sources ranging from ancestral myths, oral traditions and historical accounts to more recent political ideologies, social trends, and popular culture. With globalisation however, few of these background symbols are strictly limited to the borders of one society, and while some are arguably global, their meaning necessarily remains articulated in a deeply localised way. In a poststructural sense, these are never static but rather in a dynamic relationship with performances: background symbols shape performances but performances themselves have the potential to reshape these collective representations by introducing new symbols, subverting others, and undermining older ones.

Foreground scripts are the point of connection between the background symbols and the contingency of the performance, a crucial element used by the performer and articulated through dramatic techniques to bring these collective symbols into the performance. I define *foreground scripts* as the immediate discursive component of the performance imbuing it with meaning, the textual referential that verbally articulates the action conveyed through the performance. In other words, scripts are "the action-oriented subset of background understandings" (Alexander 2006, 58). In opposition to their definition in artistic performances, scripts in political performances are not necessarily written in advance and planned, although many of them are. Scripts can indeed be codified by traditions, written by speechwriters or by the actors themselves. They can be meticulously learned and rehearsed but also emerge spontaneously as improvisations, or more often lie somewhere in between.

Because of their textual component, foreground scripts are the part of the performance where classic forms of discourse analysis can be applied most productively, which is why I will not develop this further as countless linguistic tools can be used here. However, the specificity of performance analysis lies in its focus on the narrative and embodied function of texts, as a point of juncture between the collective and the individual.

This leads to the following questions for the PPAP:

1. What are the main background symbols evident during the performance?

2. Why have these background symbols been chosen? How do they relate to the spatio-temporal circumstances of the performance?
3. Who and what are these symbols associated with? The performer(s)? The audience? Others outside the performance?
4. What are the main themes and narratives developed in the script of the performance? How do they relate to the background symbols of the performance?
5. Is the script's narrative linear, variable or a type of hybrid?
6. What narrative and rhetorical devices are being used in the script? What is their role, and which are most prominent?
7. Was the script prepared in advance or improvised? If, in whole or part, it was written by the actor(s), how does that influence the performance?

When it comes to Greta Thunberg's performance at the UN Climate Summit in 2019, the background symbols mobilized during her performance can be divided between those associated with herself and the cause she defends – youth, future, change, justice – and those associated with the world leaders to whom she speaks – economics, politics, apathy and even evil through an *apophasis* (“if you fully understood the situation and still kept on failing to act, then you would be evil. And that I refuse to believe.”). These symbols relate to Thunberg's positionality as both a teenager and an environmental activist, evoking in simple terms the central tension within the struggle against the climate crisis.

The foreground script used is overall linear, following a clear structure moving from personal to structural issues and outlining political decisions and tipping points, although it is interrupted by the central rhetorical device of *apostrophe*, directly calling out to a specific part of the audience, most saliently through the repetition of “how dare you”. Thunberg's script also relies on the use of figurative language whether it is metaphors (“fairytales of economic growth”), idioms (“crystal clear”, “draw the line”) or personification (“the world is waking up”). The combination of direct calls to the audience, scientific facts, and visual hooks makes her performance not only accessible and straightforward, but also interactive and engaging.

Connecting the micro level of this specific performance to the more abstract macro level of discourse, the background symbols chosen in Thunberg's performance are particularly revealing of her own construction of identity, and more generally of the wider ideological struggle at play. Through her agonistic depiction of a fight between good and evil, Thunberg challenges the tenets of neoliberal capitalism by framing it as unsustainable, apathetic and responsible for the current situation. While she individually lacks the power to change the system on her own, her mobilisation of the symbols of youth and future allows her to amplify

her own concerns and to make her threat of accountability feel more palatable. Whether it was intended or not, the use of a straightforward, Manichean, catchy yet polarising script furthermore plays into the wider dynamics of social media attention, which accounts for this performance breaking from the usual mould of apathy around climate concerns.

6.2 Actor

Politics has always been embodied by flesh-and-blood individuals. Beyond texts and ideologies that remain abstract without human embodiment, what ties together political performances is the actors. Indeed, the idea that politics *is* theatre often seems intuitive, and even obvious. Because “political leadership is part theatre”, Cronin (2008, 459) for example argued that “most leaders, especially political leaders, more than they want to admit, need well-developed acting skills”. A playwright himself, Miller (2001, 1–2) argued that “we are ruled more by the arts of performance, by acting in other words, than anybody wants to think about for very long”. In other words, politicians are not just actors in the metaphorical sense, but also in the theatrical one. Actors are the beating heart of political performances: the embodied link between the audience on the one hand, and the collective background symbols and foreground scripts on the other hand.

In terms of empirical analysis, there is a wide range of elements to consider and I chose to highlight three of such dimensions in the PPAP drawing from the tools of semiotics: acoustic, visual and kinetic. To start with the acoustic dimension, Pavis (2003, 131–140) drew for instance attention to the voice and the tone of the actor and advised to pay careful attention to diction, elocution, and intonations. Similarly, scholars engaging with multimodal analysis have paid specific attention to vocal attributes like breathiness, pitch, tension or vibrato (Machin & Mayr 2020, 97–107) Indeed, just like their theatrical peers, political actors have a significant control over the acoustic elements of their performance which is why public speaking training is so important early in their careers. In practice, this means that actors can change pace, intensity and rhythm for a variety of theatrical purposes. For example, choosing where to pause during a speech grants specific emphasis to certain elements of the script, speaking slowly and clearly can give an impression of control and *gravitas* whereas fast enumerations can produce a rushed feeling of urgency.

In addition to this acoustic dimension of acting, an analysis of the actor must also focus on a multitude of visual elements. These notably include facial expressions and the gaze of the actor, which is a key component in conveying explicit meaning as well as implicit undertones, from emotions like hope or surprise to subtle cues like sarcasm or uneasiness (Machin & Mayr 2023, 93–95). While the

realism of political performances mean that masks and make-up are less important than in artistic acting, clothing is a crucial component of the actor's performance. Even though flamboyant costumes are also rarely used by political actors in a Western context, there are subtler ways politicians can convey meaning through their clothing. For example, conforming to the masculine standard of suit and tie implies seriousness while more transgressive choices of informal clothing may be used to bridge the distance with the audience. And even beyond these, one need to consider the wider sociocultural norms like gender, social class, religion or ethnicity that are expressed through the choice of clothing and attire, which can also provide valuable insights.

The kinetic, or kinaesthetic, elements of acting like gestures and body language, constitute another component of the analysis of the actor (Pavis 2003, 65–88). Just like facial expressions or gaze, movements of the body and postures convey meaning that is at times intended and at others unintended. Indeed, the way a political actor occupies space can provide information about their intention, their confidence and more generally their acting style. From the choice to sit down or move around the performance stage to the use of gestures as supplements or replacement of speech, there are countless minute kinetic details to consider when analysing a performance.

One of the key functions of acting in performance is that of conveying emotions. Whether actors simulate them or tap into method acting's emotional memory, emotions are fundamental in performances. Although they can be fostered by other factors, including for instance the use of music, the collective atmosphere developed within the audience or the type of shots used in the case of edited performances, the performer has a central role when it comes to producing the affective component of a performance. The scholarship on affects and emotions is incredibly rich and sophisticated, and the PPAP does not claim to exhaustively address this component of discourse. Instead, it encourages the analyst to consider which emotions are mobilised by the performers, their purpose, and to explore this deeper by engaging with works like Ahmed (2014), Eklundh (2019) or Eklundh and Ronderos (this SI).

A final dimension of the analysis of the actor is the concept of performative labour emphasising the work that had been put into the preparation of the performer. "Learning to perform is of course also historically embedded and therefore social in character — training manuals and courses are one source of learning, but so is our *habitus*, our social and political histories" (Rai 2014, 8). By addressing this aspect, Rai showcased the usually overlooked issue of the training costs of performing for actors, including their privileged or marginalised social position, which impacts the way they perform.

This leads to the following questions for the PPAP:

8. Who are the main actor(s) in the performance? What social roles are they enacting? How do these roles relate to their *persona*?
9. What performative labour did the actor(s) carry out before this performance? Were they trained or did they have experience with acting or performing? How does this specific performance relate to the actor's underscore (habitus, privileges, background...)? How does this impact their performance?
10. How do the actor(s) speak? What information can be gathered from their voice, pitch and tone? Which intensity and rhythm are they using in the performance? How do these acoustic elements impact the broader performance?
11. How are the actor(s) dressed? What information can be gathered from their attire or accessories? Do they follow or depart from dress code standards? How do these visual factors impact the broader performance? How do other visual factors such as facial expression and gaze impact the broader performance?
12. How do the actor(s) move on stage? How do they occupy space? What information can be gathered from their gestures and body language? How do these kinetic factors impact the broader performance?
13. What are the main emotions conveyed in the acting of the performer(s)? What purpose do they serve in the broader performance?
14. Which of these elements are intended by the actor(s) and which are not? How does this affect the performance?

Greta Thunberg is the primary actor in that performance, embodying the dual role of an environmental activist and an ordinary teenager. Despite her admittedly privileged background, she had no formal training as an actor. Although being on the spectrum of autism may have made performing more challenging, it also enabled her to develop a unique acting style and command of the stage. Indeed, Thunberg spoke in a straightforward, and even blunt way. Her voice was clear yet emotional, noticeably shaking at the start, yet gaining firmness as the performance went through. The intensity of her voice reached its peak at the beginning and ending but remained high for most of the performance. In terms of rhythm, Thunberg remained steady while breaking the flow with timed silences after impactful lines and ignoring applause, showing her authority over the audience.

In terms of clothing, she dressed in a plain yet colourful way, with a fuchsia shirt, grey pants, and a pair of blue baskets, standing out from the formal black clothing of audience members and implicitly showing the distance between her

and the members of the global elite sat around her in the room. Weaponizing this self-awareness, she emphasised this disconnect to show the absurdity of her own performance (“This is all wrong, I shouldn’t be up here”) to use *parrhesia*, making her speech candid and bold as she spoke truth to power. Although she sat throughout her entire performance, Thunberg’s stern facial expressions conveyed *gravitas* while her hand movements, slightly shaking in nervousness but also repeatedly going downwards, were hammering her arguments and energising the performance. Finally, emotions were particularly central in her acting, with the primary emotion she conveyed being anger, tainted with frustration and sadness. This choice of mobilising negative affects in a way that does not evoke pity but instead weaponizing them against her own audience contributed to breaking the consensual setting of a UN summit while making the performance feel raw and transgressive.

Connecting the micro level of Thunberg’s acting to the macro level of discourse, what emerges from her intervention is the centrality of performing identity. Regardless of the extent to which it is conscious or not, the very presence of a body in a public space, the semiotic signs associated with it (from the clothes to the gestures or the tone of the voice) and the acting itself are all details that have a wider resonance, which every individual is trained to decode intuitively. One of the reasons that Thunberg’s performance found such a global echo can be traced to the contrast between the ordinariness of her individuality and the extraordinariness of her cause. As discussed above, Thunberg embodies in this performance something larger than herself that resonated with the global *zeitgeist* as her role as an emotional young girl turned her into a personification of a powerless youth betrayed by the economic and powerful elite.

6.3 Audience

Every performance requires at its core two participants: an actor and a spectator. Given their typically collective focus, political performances are oriented towards a multiple people, an audience rather than an individual spectator. This apparently simple observation leads to several issues that have been at the heart of many debates in social sciences. Given that “audiences are not only separated from [the] performers but also are internally divided among themselves” (Alexander 2006, 75), there will be as many interpretations of any performance as there are audience members, leading to the thorny question of how to capture audience reception.

To clarify these issues, Saward’s (2010) notion of the representative claim provides several key insights. For him, representation is not a fixed status but a performative act, which he called a “representative claim”. These claims can be made

about a person or a group of people, but also about the ‘essence’ of a country, about nature in general, future generations and so on. In this sense, one needs to distinguish the audience, the group an actor speaks *to*, from the constituency, the group an actor speaks *for*. In contrast with theatrical performances, for which this distinction is not fundamental because the only audience that matters is physically present to watch the stage, audiences for political performances go beyond physicality:

“Unlike a theatre audience, citizens or constituents are not necessarily present as audience; performances in political institutions are carried out for both the audience present – ‘the empirically present listeners’ – and the ‘ghostly audiences’ outside the spatial parameters of performance”. (Rai 2014, 10)

It is important to emphasise that a representative claim is a creative gesture that fills the “aesthetic gap” (Ankersmit 2002, 34) between representative and represented. In other words, “there is an indispensable aesthetic moment in political representation because the represented is never just given, unambiguous, transparent” (Saward 2010, 74), the representative must “mould, shape, and in one sense create that which is to be represented” (*ibid.*). And because of this inevitable aesthetic gap, representative claims only constitute a perspective, an angle, instead of ‘truly accurate’ depictions of the constituency. Conversely, political actors are shaped in return as a claim to be embodying a constituency implies acting in a way that the audience will find convincing, thus reshaping the public identity of the actor accordingly.

Finally, while the questions of receptions from the “ghostly audiences” (Rai 2014, 10) – their reception or rejection of performative claims and of the performance more widely – go beyond the scope of this tool, the live audience to a political performance, if there is one, is not a merely passive recipient. For instance, a live audience may react to a performance in very different ways, from warm enthusiasm to cold silence, and in turn shape the way the performer acts in reaction.

This leads to the following questions for the PPAP:

15. Who is the audience for the performance? If the performance makes a representative claim, who is its constituency? How are audience and constituency related?
16. How do the actors relate to the audience and to the constituency? Are they portraying themselves as ‘one of them’? As distinct from them? How do they attempt to achieve that portrayal?
17. If a representative claim is being performatively made, how is the constituency portrayed by the actor(s)? What symbols and images are used to represent it?

18. Is there an invisible audience beyond the visible one? What is the impact of the performance's representation of this audience (is it silenced or granted agency)?
19. Is the performance taking place in front of a live audience? Is part of the audience physically present during the performance? If so, what is the impact of that presence on the broader performance?

There were two audiences mobilised in Thunberg's performance. Firstly, the constituency which she spoke *for* and claimed to represent by using first-person plural pronouns ("we", "our"), associated with her as a representative of the youth. This part of the audience was not physically present and typically silenced in the institutional setting of UN summitry, including both the current youth and future generations. She even implicitly summoned by contrast the less privileged youth by acknowledging her own privilege ("And I am one of the lucky ones"). Secondly, the audience she spoke *to*, the political and business elites customarily present in such an event to which she sent a message of accountability, a call to urgent actions and even a warning ("change is coming, whether you like it or not").

Theatrically speaking, Thunberg emphasised her belonging with her constituency through her performances of ordinariness discussed in the previous section (plain clothing, blunt delivery, honest message) while accentuating her differences with her target audience by breaking the norms of international summitry in behaviour and language. Members of the physical audience of the performance were a part of this second group, and they did interact with her through their applause. But, by not answering to their reactions with expected reactions like a smile or a nod of approval and instead meeting them with silence, Thunberg implicitly reaffirmed their position in the implied "you", uncomfortably holding them accountable to her accusatory message.

Connecting the micro level of this performance to the macro level of discourse, what is most salient in this case is the process of identification and embodiment that Thunberg builds through the process of her representative claim. Political ecology in general and the struggle against the climate crisis in particular have been issues for which establishing a direct connection is challenging. Making individuals personally care about such a complex issue which would require an entire overhaul of the economic system seems like an impossible task. And yet, her performance of ordinariness, her heartfelt delivery and unapologetic alienation of those she wants to hold accountable, Thunberg arguably managed to become incredibly relatable. She became overnight the global face of environmentalism in a way that other similar performers had failed to do. While psychoanalysis may help us elaborate further on the mechanisms of this performance (identification, catharsis, ...), Thunberg's performance contributed to the complex

process of the constitution of a social subjectivity of an entire generation around the fight against the climate crisis.

6.4 Mise-en-scène

The fourth constitutive element of political performance examined by the PPAP is the *mise-en-scène*, a French expression which literally means “putting into the stage/scene”. The *mise-en-scène* of a performance refers to the set of aesthetic and dramaturgical choices allowing the performance to take place in a specific time and place: “the confrontation of text and performance” or more precisely the “confrontation, in a given space and time, of different signifying systems, for an audience” (Pavis 1988, 87). From the most general decisions about the way the actors engage with the audience to the most minute choices about the lighting of the stage, *mise-en-scène* covers a broad variety of elements.

In artistic performances, the *mise-en-scène* of a play or film is the work of a specific individual, the director, or team of individuals whose purpose is precisely to tailor the way discourse is set into motion. By contrast, political performances are typically not characterised by the external intervention of a distinct director in charge of the *mise-en-scène*. Instead, the choices of *mise-en-scène* in politics can be seen along a continuum where, on the one side, political actors personally take care of every single aspect of it or, on the other extreme, a situation where they delegate all these theatrical aspects to a team of advisers, consultants, event planners and other specialists.

Several aspects of the *mise-en-scène* have already been discussed in the section on the actor: the acting style, the types of gestures, the specific choices of clothing and make-up are all examples of elements of the *mise-en-scène*, as long as they are intended by the actors. However, an important caveat to be considered is that the political actors and their team are rarely, if ever, in charge of *every* choice of *mise-en-scène*. Many political performances, like debates in electoral campaign or institutional ceremonies, follow rules that have been set by traditions or legal rules. As such, their organisational practicalities are only partially in the hands of the politicians. Instead, key strategic agency is granted to external actors, like a media corporation or an administrative institution.

One of the most important facets of *mise-en-scène* is scenography, the art of creating performance environments. Scenography includes, among others, the aesthetic choices related to light and sound, as well as those made on props, on the acting space and its layout. In terms of lighting for instance, performing with a natural light for instance implies choosing a specific angle that will not blind the audience looking at the actor or allow clear takes on camera if the performance is being recorded. Another significant aspect of the scenography is the

way the physical platform of the stage is being symbolically shaped for the performance. Beyond material considerations that ensure for example that the performer can be heard, staging is crucial for the interaction with the audience. Using an elevated platform or podium in a rally creates a distance between the actor and the spectator. Conversely, performances taking place on level ground foster proximity between performer and audience.

Another important part of *mise-en-scène* lies in the use of specific props and accessories as items can play a specific symbolic role when brought into the performance. They can even “serve as iconic representations to help [the actors] dramatize and make vivid the invisible motives and morals they are trying to represent” (Alexander 2006, 36). As such, the choice to use a prop can serve larger symbolic purposes by not only capturing the visual attention of the audience through these material objects, but also by tapping into the wider tapestry of background symbols.

Finally, considerations of *mise-en-scène* are especially relevant when it comes to video performances. Since they are shot in advance and produced by a team of specialists, they follow different rules of scenography than live performances. This brings them closer in nature to a film where many other factors should be accounted for. Music for instance, while being sometimes used during rallies and other official ceremonies, plays an even more central role in videoclips where it impacts the tonality as well as the rhythm of the performance. Editing and *montage* are other elements that distinguish video performances from live performances and specific attention should then be dedicated to the way the video is structured. In addition to these, the analysis of such performances also implies paying specific attention to cinematic techniques including the use of shots (long, close-ups, sequence, low-angle, aerial...), discussing their technicality as well as their symbolic and strategic purpose within the broader performance.

This leads to the following questions for the PPAP:

20. What are the key strategic and aesthetic decisions taken for this performance? What are their theatrical purposes?
21. Which aspects of the *mise-en-scène* are being controlled by the actors? Which ones are not? Which have been negotiated and by whom?
22. What is the scenography of the performance (scenic design, lighting, sound...)? How does it evolve throughout the performance?
23. What is the layout of the physical stage of the performance? How is it used?
24. What kind of props and accessories are being used on stage? For which purpose?
25. For video performances, what cinematic techniques are used, with regards to music and editing? How do they impact the performance?

The *mise-en-scène* of Thunberg's performance was primarily controlled by the organisers from the United Nations, which explains why it was in the acting and script that most of her agency came through. The scenography was classic and static, with two separated spaces: an elevated stage for performers and a lower space with seats for the audience. The lighting was exclusively focused on the stage to showcase the performers while the sound is managed with microphones ensuring the performers can be heard throughout the room. The only props used by the performers were these microphones and sheets with their scripts written down.

The performance took place in front of a sky-blue panel whose colour was both a call-back to the UN's signature and a positively connotated symbol that could symbolise serenity, a positive future or even youth itself. Outside of the sky-blue colour, the aesthetics of the performance were subdued and rather classic, meant to welcome the traditional interventions of a UN summit which further accentuated Thunberg's transgression of these codes. Likewise, the video recording of the performance done by the United Nations was static, with mainly close-up shots of Thunberg and a few more distant shots or side shots offering a different perspective on her speech. They were not closely edited in a cinematic way, without music or fast cuts for instance, and thus meant to convey the natural flow of the performance.

Connecting the micro-level of this *mise-en-scène* to the macro level of discourse, the most striking element here is the minimalism of the performance. For an event with such a global reach, it is remarkable that the staging of the entire performance is so subdued and mundane. There are multiple reasons for this, including the acknowledgement that these kinds of events are not meant to be particularly meaningful or important in symbolic terms. In contrast with national and global ceremonies and rituals that are lavish and spectacular, such as a coronation or a national holiday, UN summits do not seem to hold much symbolic power. Materially speaking, this moderate importance gets reflected in a relatively low budget, which also explains the lack of particularity. This ordinary staging nevertheless reflects structural elements, like the bourgeois codes of the socially dominant groups in the West: politeness, formality, respect for the institutions, rationality and emotional restraint. It is precisely because of the transgressive gesture of breaking these implicit rules that Thunberg managed to trigger such a vivid reaction.

7. Conclusion

As the case of this brief analysis of Thunberg's performance illustrated, the PPAP provides a means to engage with underexplored layers of discourse, from acting

and scenography to the theatrical interaction between performer and audience. However, it is important to acknowledge that the PPAP was not designed to replace other methods in DT and beyond, but instead to provide a supplementary perspective to other tools focused on the textual component of discourse. Its focus on scripts and narratives enables a different outlook on language but it cannot reach the depth that linguistic methods provide. Furthermore, the PPAP is focused on performance production rather than on reception, prioritising the actor-driven side of political performances and only partially addressing the audience-side. Methods tailored to this aspect like interviews or focus groups could however provide complementary insights into the reception of these political performances.

Practically speaking, the PPAP also becomes increasingly time-consuming as the length of the political performances it tackles increases, which also results in yielding an increasingly large amount of minute information that would need refining to be meaningful. Furthermore, although the questions can be quickly answered as one watches a performance once, the PPAP's value only increases with multiple viewings, going back and forth from the performance to the questions. As a result, the PPAP is not well-equipped for the analysis of a large-n samples of performances, and instead most suited for small-n analysis of a handful of performances. In this perspective, computer-assisted analysis of discourse and most forms of content analysis provide a much better starting point for this kind of quantitative endeavour. Instead, the PPAP is able to inductively provide new insights to studies seeking to tackle the performative components of discourse for more detailed qualitative analysis.

With these caveats in mind and going back to the main aspiration of this article to provide a methodology that can “operationalize DT’s discursive perspective on the social [...] beyond guidelines for textual analysis” (De Cleen et al. 2021, 26) the PPAP’s advantages are manifold. Firstly, it is a holistic tool, paying attention to every aspect of a performance, considering their interactions and complementarity in producing meaning making. Secondly, because it is an inductive tool, the PPAP is particularly complementary with more deductive forms of discourse analysis, providing a way to make salient facets of discourse that DT analysis usually neglects. Thirdly, its focus on representation and performativity provides a unique perspective on the way political subjectivities are articulated and ideologies embodied through performance. Going beyond the focus of scholars of DT on ‘texts’, the PPAP’s transdisciplinary outlook provides through the lens of politics “as performance” (Taylor 2003, 3) a new way to consider the material embodiment of discourse.

Even though the study of political performances may seem removed from the concerns of DT scholars about the wider hegemonic struggles of ideologies

and the processes of collective social subjectivities, the performative and theatrical dimensions of discourse hold incredible potential in comprehending the way these macro issues become concretely articulated on a micro level, and conversely how apparently superficial details may shape the political system. As demonstrated in the case of Thunberg's performance, every detail in a performance can be connected to a wider power struggle and the challenge for the analyst is to properly establish these links and use the depth of such an analysis to highlight a stimulating and underexplored elements of politics. Political performances play a fundamental role in social phenomena like embodiment, identification and representation, without which the key issues of contemporary politics cannot be fully grasped. It is only a matter of opening one's perspective to the endless potentialities of discourse.

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